

GETTING THE RIGHT START:
**10 THINGS YOU NEED
TO KNOW ABOUT
WEBSITE REDESIGN**

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Given the current economic situation and the uncertainty it has brought to many colleges and universities, a website redesign may be more critical than ever to attract prospective students and donors to your website. Yet a website redesign requires a significant investment, and you need to be certain that your dollars and time are well spent. Before undertaking a redesign, do the homework necessary to guarantee your ROI.

Ten things you need to know before starting a redesign:

1. What is the scope and budget for the project? Is this a redesign of the entire site or a refresh of the interface design with content updates?
2. What is your timeline for the entire project and what are the milestones along the way?
3. What are the outcomes expected? By what will you measure whether this project is successful, and how do you plan to reach those goals?
4. Is the plan to launch a fully developed site all at once or is it to roll out the site incrementally? Will the project be completed (and budgeted for) in phases?
5. Based on research, what do you know about your primary audiences and what they expect and need from your website?
6. Based on analytics, what do you know (not think) about your audiences' navigation habits? Based on feedback from your primary audiences, how does the site architecture need to change?
7. Do you have the staff to handle this type of project in-house with current staff? Where do you need/want outside assistance—interface design, content development, programming?
8. What has been and what will be the work flow for updating and changing content? Content migration?
9. What is the skill level of the various people charged with content uploads? What amount and level of training needs to take place?
10. What is the plan for launch and post-launch?

#1: SCOPE

The first step to any redesign project is defining the scope of what you want to accomplish. At this stage, establish an oversight committee to gain the buy-in you want from the campus community. Be sure that the committee includes decision makers from Marketing, PR, and IT, among others. Consider who the primary audiences are for the website and choose committee members accordingly.

This committee will not be the working group, but a committee of decision makers. Too often a committee can slow down the process, so choose the members wisely. This group will assist in communicating the project to the campus community, gain buy-in for the critical pages, and will be influential when faced with budget issues, including cuts that could negatively affect the outcome of the project.

#2: TIMELINE

The tendency is to say “we need this website done by...” and then allow that urgency to drive and possibly unrealistically rush the project. The result is not that the process is completed quicker, but rather that the group is frustrated by how long it is taking, missed deadlines, etc.

Contact other colleges similar in size (as measured by number of pages on the site and staffing) who have recently done a redesign and get a sense of when they started, and when they launched. There will be numerous variables, but generally it is a 6 to 9 month window. If you are bringing in a vendor to assist in the project, they can help you to establish a realistic timeline.

Too often the focus is on completion of the re-design, not the milestones along the way. The reality is that by hitting the interim goals, the overall project will be successful and on-time. An effective timeline includes the following elements:

- Ample time for research of your primary audiences
- Allowing for revisions in design elements and content development
- Migration of content is much more than a cut and paste; plan accordingly

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#3 OUTCOMES

The project should be driven by outcomes, not process and methodology. Methodology should be the means to the outcome—not the other way around.

Establish goals. Ask the overview committee these questions:

- What is the motivation for the redesign?
- What do you expect to get out of the project?
- How do you measure success?

Without a doubt, the overview committee needs to be aware of what they want from this project and what outcomes are expected.

Communicate...and keep communicating.

It will be important to communicate the expected outcomes, milestones, and the timeline to the campus community. If there is a lack of regular communication about the timeline, outcomes, and measures for success, conversations over the water cooler will take its place. What you don't officially communicate will become fodder for rumors and misunderstanding.

#4 TOTAL LAUNCH VS INCREMENTAL ROLL

Like the outcomes, if this decision is not defined early, and communicated campus-wide, an incremental roll out can be viewed as a project gone awry, rather than a thoughtful strategy.

The Pros

The advantage to an incremental roll out of the website is to give primary users a new look and feel, design, and some (although not all) navigation assistance, rather than waiting until every last page four levels deep has been migrated.

Feedback. Of course you build testing into your redesign at multiple stages, but what if an element was overlooked in the testing?

The Cons

The downside to rolling the redesign out in pieces is that critics of the site and the process will come crawling out of the woodwork like termites. Because the design might only go two levels deep, and the architecture is not complete, communicating to the campus community that this is not a finished product is very important. Again, you risk having misinformation spread at the water cooler.

#5: RESEARCH

Decide early how much research you think you need, and then talk to some experts in the field. Chances are, you underestimated. Research is one of those items in a redesign process that can kick up the cost and extend what you thought was a reasonable amount of time for the project. If you don't do the research up front and comprehensively, you may end up not reaching the goals you set for the new website, and you could then end up doing an entire redesign again, too soon. In the long run, the initial investment of time and dollars is always money well spent.

#6: NAVIGATION/ARCHITECTURE

Before beginning your redesign project, part of your research needs to be a close look at how your primary audiences use the existing site and the navigation they want and expect.

Staff and faculty at colleges will create some interesting and sometimes elaborate short cuts to navigate through the site. Over time, they become so accustomed to these created short cuts that they do not realize that the steps they are going through are a result of poor architecture. An important step of the research involves talking to these groups in a focus group format in order to understand what they want to accomplish and to find strategies for easier and simpler navigation.

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#7: STAFFING

Unless you are in the very rare situation of having staff with time on their hands, or you don't need to launch the new website for three years, some or all of this project will likely be outsourced. Deciding what you want to outsource means taking a close look at:

- Level of staffing in place
- Current workflow
- Future workflow whether you have a CMS or not
- Investment in current staff can make to the project above and beyond their regular roles
- An honest assessment of staff skill levels
- Training required

#8: WORKFLOW

Do you have an author, edit, publish system in place and are the staff capable and willing? What amount and level of training will be required? There are some who would argue that you can make decisions regarding outsourcing and staffing levels as you go along. This is not an effective approach. Other than migrating content, lack of realism about staff workloads and changing workflows is the primary reason most college web redesign projects take months longer than expected to complete.

#9: TRAINING

Training is recommended for those who author, edit and publish content. Also, the initial training needs to be backed up by ongoing updates for new and existing staff. You will want to allocate time and dollars for the initial training to allow staff to become familiar with the new site, and also to find and train those who will always be looking to improve the experience for their users.

#10: THE LAUNCH AND POST-LAUNCH ENVIRONMENT

The rule of thumb when undergoing a home construction project is to expect that it will take 25% more time and 25% more dollars than anticipated. That is probably not a bad estimation for a redesign either. Whether you roll the redesign out incrementally or launch all at once, inevitably you will encounter a misstep that causes a delay or adds an expense. If your timeline is to complete the project in 150 days, recognize that a week here or there can quickly add up, especially as you get closer to launch. With proper planning you can stay very close to timeline and budget; websites get done on budget and on time regularly, but this is most likely to happen with realistic planning ahead of time.

Of course, you will want to do post-launch usability testing. Sometimes, you don't get an A+. So, you'll want to be able to budget the time to test and take the time to correct.

Given questions on enrollment, budget cuts, and declining endowments, it is no longer just those colleges that are solely tuition driven that need to pay close attention to the post-launch environment. What will the workflow, timeline and budget be like in the post-launch environment? This needs to be asked before the start of the redesign project. More than ever, few colleges are in a situation where budget overages (which missed deadlines turn into) can be accommodated.

A CLOSING THOUGHT

A redesign of a website is necessary every few years or so. This necessity does not need to be a dreaded chore; it can be an event to look forward to. Start by asking yourself and your team these ten questions and then put pen to paper with some advance planning.

A well thought-out redesign will last longer because it is not designed for today but for the possibilities of tomorrow. Also, if you have done your homework in the research, the site will prove to be a great return on your investment by creating a space that truly engages your primary audiences.

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